




Four Quarters



J. E. B. Bancroft

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Obituaries

No Regrets

ROGER FINCH

I was given courage, a sense of adventure and a little bit of humor. I have had a wonderful life. I have never regretted what I did.

Ingrid Bergman

You were always there. How could you die,
you were younger than my mother. Confecting film
invests in us a few years of grace,
gives us the illusion that those frozen gestures
that once ran parallel with time can free you,
can repay to us your form, your face,

the liquid course of your hands, the lark
lifting above meadows in your voice. Somewhere
you are playing. I want to watch you live
again through that lantern's powerful magic.
I want to see the musician, the fighter,
the saint, the nun and the fugitive

spy you became become on the screen
before me. I want to drink the champagne of youth
from your contemporary image.

I want to return from one of your movies
to the unmade home, the broken dishes, the lost
family albums. I want to turn the page

as the credits come on and there you are,
Joan of Arc, and everything I had is whole
once more in that life that I was born for.
I, too, have never regretted what I did;
I only regret what there was no time to do.
It is not you but the past I mourn for.

Anne Sexton's Last Reading

SISTER ANNE HIGGINS

Seven years later I remember
the long red dress
clinging to your lanky frame,
a slash of blood
in the middle of the stage.
Your poems, too,
like slashes of blood.
How impolite of me
to stare at them.
You hung them in the air
with your
low nonchalant voice,
arranged them with
garish foreign hands,
garnished them
with cigarette smoke.
"Unless God keep the city,
the watchman watches
in vain."
You said it was from Kennedy.
Now I know it is a psalm,
and now I know
that two days later
you killed yourself
in a closed garage
with poison smoke
unnoticed by the watchman.
Rains of my regret
cannot wash
the blood from
your poems.

"No Stranger Could Have Said"

for John Gardner, 1933-1982

JAMES A. MILLER

That you should have started out
with "The Resurrection" is only,
perhaps, one of your minor flaws.
Your timing was in fact rather
perfect; the sequence may have been
unusual; you had the beat. You stood.

What dialogues you held with your-
self, us, the world of light, dark-
ness, Grendel, Chaucer, October!
Freddy was no more alien to you
than Agathon or the wreckage Nickel
Mountain exacts on seeker and un-

Seeker alike. Illinois and Penn-
sylvania and New York, their heart-
land and trees and country roads,
also had their ghosts, their
college towns, their universities;
not, necessarily, their fiction,

Which you understood was moral: or,
the attempt, at least. Could never,
you understood, be very fashionable;
at best be granted a large ability
and written off as beyond the do-
main of what you undertook, what

You claimed to the end could be
taken. Now, no one knows. On a road
out beyond where William Penn never
ventured and beneath elms soon
you desired with your wife once
again, you expired into the world

Of light. Hurtling perhaps or slowly
like a dream. You became your own
novelist; the words now written: Weep.

An Encounter With Tennessee Williams

BILL WINE

MY PLAYWRIGHTING professor greeted us at our first class meeting in New York City in 1974 with an entreaty to look each other over.

"What you see on each and every face in this room is fear and insecurity," he said, his eyes sparkling. "And if you could see Tennessee Williams's face at this very moment, wherever he might be, you would read the same two emotions at a glance. It's what fuels the playwright's art."

I could feel relief pass through me. Thankfully I thought, the arsenal of neuroses that has always sustained me is standard equipment in this war.

But Tennessee Williams? Fear and insecurity? Surely just the clever remark of a disingenuous teacher, I decided.

Three years, three hundred rewrites, and three thousand miles later, I sat in the back row of a Los Angeles theater with the director of my first play. The penultimate preview was just underway: the first critic was still forty-eight hours from his front-row, center-aisle seat.

The director and I were each to take voluminous notes which she was to share with the cast following the performance. But my considerable anxiety would not lend itself to scribbling in the dark. Before five lines of dialogue had been spoken, I leaned to my left and let loose a torrent of whining.

"The audience is in the wrong mood," I whispered, so loudly that she gently shushed me. "They don't know whether that line is supposed to be funny or not. And how can she say that to him upstage? She's got to come downstage and face the audience when she says it. Isn't the stage too cluttered? They're still sizing up the set—no wonder they're missing the point of the dialogue. It's talky, though, isn't it? I knew it was talky."

My veteran colleague took my hand and patted it. Her smile was both knowing and patronizing. I expected her to reach into her pocket and place a dog biscuit on my tongue. But she merely went back to her own note-taking. I relaxed not a whit.

Our next day's preview was a matinee. That evening, knowing sleep would not be on the itinerary, I searched the theater pages of the newspaper the way an insomniac canvases the post-midnight television listings.

An ad announced previews for the new version of a Tennessee Williams play, at an "Off-Hollywood" theater just a few blocks from the theater where my play was to open the next night. As a tem-

porarily privileged member of the Off-Hollywood community, I wangled my way in to an already sold-out performance.

I had a feeling Mr. Williams would be at this performance of *The Two-Character Play*, renamed since its brief New York run as *Out Cry*. What I did not realize in advance was that I would be seated directly behind the playwright and his director, John Hancock, in their special section of the theater.

My proximity to the artist who gave the world Blanche DuBois, Maggie the Cat, and The Gentleman Caller intrigued me: I would be able to see whether, and how, a member of the world theater pantheon suffered through a preview of a play of his.

And suffer he did.

The play had hardly gotten under way when Williams leaned to *his* left and began a seemingly endless list of suggestions, reservations, reminders, qualifications, and modifications to his director. His tone was an uncannily subdued whisper—the soft voice of experience—and was no bother to anyone in attendance except me, for I was straining, nearly genuflecting, to hear his comments.

To my amazement, that initial crumb of academic fortune-cookie wisdom had been correct. Mr. Williams *was* full of fear and insecurity. If the Pulitzer Prizes, Broadway productions, and Hollywood movies had assuaged his anxiety at all, it was only to the extent that he now seemed capable of enjoying the performances of the actors even as he nervously dissected their every phrase and gesture.

But why was this painstaking assessment necessary? Surely there was too much attendant anguish for this to be purely an expression of a playwright's perfectionism. Hadn't he, of all people, earned the right to leave such troubles behind? Hadn't he *outgrown* them?

Apparently not.

Here, during a period of grating artistic decline, one of the theatrical community's gods was frozen—defensive, struggling to rediscover the kindness of strangers.

And one row behind him, I felt a shiver of sadness. My perception of how dizzying a fall from artistic grace must feel made me want to give up before I began. I thought of a mountain climber who, upon taking his first upward step, suddenly realizes that he will be derided—or worse, ignored—on the way down. Involuntarily, I shrugged, as if to loose a backpack full of gear.

This is the payoff, I thought, if even my wildest aspirations are *reached*.

Outcry, indeed.

Making It All Add Up

ELIZABETH McBRIDE

WHAT I NEED IS A RITUAL to cancel Wesley's power over me. My friend Millie suggested it—she's read a lot of anthropology.

"We're ignoring our basic needs," Millie says. "People should stop repressing their feelings and act them out."

"If I acted out my feelings I might end up in jail," I told her.

"I don't mean directly," she said, "I mean through ritual. New rituals could help us deal with the changing realities of our lives."

When she got her second divorce, Millie had a wedding cake made and decorated, black on one side and white on the other. At the celebration, in front of all her friends, she cut the cake in half with a machete. I'm a math teacher and that made sense to me, a form of division. She slid the black half into a cardboard box and placed a brand new Tonka truck on the plate, a lumber truck—logs stacked on a flat-bed. Millie says she's tired of intellectuals. She's been married to two of them, and that's two too many. What she wants now is a truck driver. She doesn't mind a man who comes and goes irregularly as long as he does it with enthusiasm. I think maybe all Millie wants is the truck. She understands machinery because she has an old Karmann Ghia she works on. Besides, she already knows how to drive.

While the idea of ritual appealed to me, I didn't want to give Wesley up. He teaches physics at my high school. He's a good friend to me; every day we eat lunch together. I need someone who understands me, even if all we do is talk. Millie thinks talk is boring. She thinks about boredom a lot.

"One of those changing realities of our lives," she tells me, "is that we live long enough to get bored. That didn't used to happen. At least now we can do something about it."

Well, I think that's how people get themselves into trouble, and Millie ought to realize that. Before she married David, her first husband, they went to all the theatre and art openings. Early in their marriage he even took her once a year to a fancy European-style hotel for the weekend. That was when he first started experimenting with pure style, painting canvases in graduated shades of the same color, with lots of straight lines. I never liked his work half as much when he

went on to triangles and put the chartreuse next to the fuchsia. He was supposed to be working all the time then, or at least Millie thought so, but she could rarely reach him at the studio. Our friend Sally snickered when she heard that.

Anyway, to keep busy, Millie took a continuing education course in Geology. That's where she met Frank. Millie had a habit of falling in love with teachers. She said they impressed her: they knew so much. Frank was used to traveling because he was into exploration, so while Millie was still married to David, Frank would ask her to meet him in sleazy motels all over the east side of town. She liked that.

"David would never stay in motels," she told me. "He was afraid the sheets wouldn't be clean."

"And they wouldn't," Sally said, "if Frank and Millie had been there first."

But after they got married, Millie would never go with him. I think that's why he stopped talking to her. That last year she said he didn't even like his job anymore.

"He said he'd gotten tired of looking for something that wasn't always there. He wanted to get down to the nitty-gritty, bring in the heavy machinery and drill. Then he thought he'd be satisfied."

I told Sally it was clear Millie was back to division.

Wesley says Millie couldn't stay with David or Frank because she doesn't understand intellectuals. I don't know about that. I think she just needs a change. So I introduced her to my friend Pete. Pete's not a truck driver and he says he's not an intellectual, but he reads poetry. And when he talks about sex, I dream about being in bed with him myself. Of course, I'd be afraid to do anything about that. My husband knows Pete and he might figure us out and get ideas. As I tell my Algebra classes, when you multiply one side of an equation by an unknown, you have to do the same to the other side or the two won't balance. So I introduced Pete to Millie. She's a beautiful woman and she goes out as much as anyone needs to, but every day we get a day older and we want more than entertainment. I thought Pete might be able to push her into another dimension. I thought he might be deep because Wesley had told me that mathematics and poetry spring from the same well of knowledge, which he called the hidden source of myth—whatever that means. He may have been talking dirty because he was looking straight into my eyes at the time.

WHEN I MET WESLEY, he attracted me so much I could imagine myself going completely out of control. I began to dream of curves moving closer and closer to their tangent. So when we were together I would look in another direction. He picked up on that

and we sat side by side, looking out in parallel lines over the lunchroom. Often when I sneaked a look at him, I caught him looking at Sylvia, the new gym teacher. I hate Sylvia. She's tall and thin and has big breasts, and she doesn't look a day over twenty-five. I get so jealous sometimes I forget contemporary women are supposed to be sophisticated. Millie says its ridiculous to compare myself to that girl.

"You have so much charm," she tells me.

But I know she's just being loyal. Because while I'm busy trying to charm Wesley with my charm, I can see that what he's paying attention to is Sylvia's body. I knew I was being silly to get jealous; after all, I'm the one Wesley talks to. And I remember him telling me about a physicist who says you can't tell the speed and location of those little particles at the same time. I'm not quite sure how that works, but it reminds me that when you're trying too hard to measure up, you can forget where you are.

SALLY SAYS THE WHOLE PROBLEM is penis envy, a classic case. She's been reading Freud. They intimidate me, those women, the way they read things.

"If you can't have it," she claims, "you don't want anyone else to have it either. What you need to do is design a ritual like Millie's that'll keep you from thinking about Wesley's penis."

I liked that idea but when I thought about it, all I could imagine was something stereotyped, like naked savages dancing around a totem pole. The old women, tired of sitting down at the edge of the clearing, would tear the pole out of the earth and throw it over the fire. Or they could push the young virgins into the mouth of the volcano. Pretty ordinary stuff. If I wanted to do something like Millie did, I'd have to make a clay figure and chop its penis off. Then I could draw a picture of Sylvia and burn it. Even I know something about voodoo.

By then I was avoiding Wesley and I missed him; I have an affection for people who teach me things. While I was moping around one afternoon, my mother called. She'd been to a wedding in San Francisco where the attendants wore black suits with white blouses and carried calla lilies. The groom wore a grey tuxedo and the bride had wanted to wear a black one, but the minister said that was going too far.

"Sounds like a funeral to me," I said.

I thought about that while I was watering the plants. I saw one of those little green lizards that run into the house every time the door opens. When I'm trying to pick them up and put them outside, I'm always afraid I'll tear their tails. I knew they had two penises; it's one

of the amazing bits of information my husband makes available to me. Not that you can read that in just any encyclopedia; most books don't have what you need to know, like the sex lives of animals. Then I remembered working on exponents in fifth period. That class isn't one of my successes—I have to keep reminding the students that whether you square plus six or minus six, you get the same answer. That made me think that adding something might be the same as subtracting. I could combine elements of Millie's divorce and that wedding my mother went to, and be original for a change. If I could work through this problem, I told myself, I wouldn't be telling my husband how tired I am all the time. Last week when Wesley was explaining relativity, I realized I'd been spending so much time on this matter, I'd lost all my energy.

SPEAKING OF ENERGY, this weekend I had my slumber party. We stayed up almost all night. Penny, the art teacher, said it was crazy, but Millie says if women approaching middle age would spend more time acting out their fantasies, they wouldn't have to make their children do it for them. So I've been dressing funny lately, and trying to do something silly every day. That might not sound radical to some people, but I used to have a reputation for being too serious. And when I was growing up, I never had a slumber party. I also never went to a drive-in movie and consequently was still a virgin when I was twenty, but it's too late to do anything about that. Before the party I opened a bag of pretzels and got out the popcorn. Donna was bringing her tarot cards and ouija board, and Penny said she wanted to make fudge and send out for pizza. I'd already bought some coloring books and a new box of 48 crayons. Then I found a piece of poster board the kids had gotten to make my birthday card. They do that every year. When Penny got there, I had her draw a picture of Wesley. We argued about what to have him doing, but finally she stood him up at the blackboard and put a piece of chalk in his hand. I did have mixed feelings. It seemed like I might be giving up the last romantic fling I'd ever have; it's not every day you meet a man who can keep you nervous for a whole year. Still, Sally says, "If you ever do get him into bed, honey, I bet he won't stay there." And when I thought about it, I could see him plain as day, stalking around naked, talking about accelerating particles. Eventually he would probably just break up with me and then I wouldn't even have him for a friend.

When Sally got to the party, she pulled out of her purse some of those things men wear. I hesitate to call them rubbers, but condoms sounds so prissy. She blew them up and hung them from the light fixture in the living room. As a last touch I took two of them and played pin-the-penis on Wesley. He looked so ridiculous; I could giggle right now, just thinking about it.

I'm still not sure I did the right thing. Penny says life doesn't imitate art and nothing works out the way we expect it to. Sally says I should just undress that man and take him to bed. And when my mother called this morning to ask me to go to church, I remembered—every year we kill Jesus and every year he rises out of his body. What I think that means is that magic is temporary; next year I might have to go through this again. But I try to have faith in myself. Because if there's anything I've learned, it's that going around in circles is human. And for some people, it might be the only way to learn how to travel in a straight line.

Sleep Lust—A Fragment

RUTH MOON KEMPER

Nothing is as lonely
as sleep. Its creatures
when remembered at all

mere phantoms
grasped in empty hands
a sense of frigid heat—

whereas, waking
is alarmingly the same

on day's plane.

Echo

Robyn Wiegman

When wind carries my lament
and poppies lift their curled ears
I seek the one pure note
that melts the harvest grass
and bears me to a home
of empty sound
where no shrill tongue
can steal my grief.

Dusk At Verrazano Narrows

JOHN R. REED

Slowly, darkness
Rises from the water
Licking at the bridge.
Pale concrete
And painted iron
Flesh release their hold
Around a graceful skeleton,

A bare green neon spine
Arched above
The shaded ships at anchor
Who, in black safety
On the silent tide,
Rock gently

And mock the frantic
Arteries
Of red and white
Snaking headlong
Through the glowing bits
Of disconnected bone.

Smoke

Paul Ramsey

Its garment
Is the selvage
Of its shroud.

From a Distance Seen

JON COHEN

NICK STOOD IN THE POND up to his waist. He could feel catfish gently bumping his legs, nibbling at him with their soft mucilaginous mouths. How strange his intruding legs must seem to them, two green-white pillars thrust suddenly into their dim world. Were they actually trying to eat him, or was their nibbling an attempt to warn him, one species to another, that he had entered an element in which he did not belong? Beyond him Anne cut sleekly through the water, her arms and legs propelling her with a confident rhythm. *She* certainly belonged.

Nick watched her circle the pond, then backed away as she approached splashing. "You coming in?" she asked. There was a thin green strip of algae draped across her forearm. He reached out, then decided he didn't want to touch it and let his hand drop.

"I am in," he said.

Anne floated slowly backwards. "Yes," she said turning and swimming away, "I suppose you think you are." The words came at him from over her shoulder. Nick knew she would not bother to measure their effect.

He bent his knees and eased himself into the water until his eyes were even with the surface of the pond. He clamped his lips to keep out the warm water and algae. And catfish. Now the pond seemed very large, the distance between him and Anne great. Still she swam on, away across this oceanic expanse, until she was lost to him. He stayed like that, alone in drifting ease, content. A change in currents wrapped him in sudden cold and he raised himself, the pond shrinking. Anne reappeared on the bank opposite, her frown leaping across the water at him.

"I'm going back up to the house," she called. "You coming?" Her voice did not echo the invitation.

"I think I'll stay here for awhile," he called back. She pulled on a pair of shorts and walked barefoot up the hill. Nick looked down at his own white feet, then slipped into his sneakers and made his way carefully to the dock. Leaning against a post he studied the empty meadow beyond the pond, a solitary audience waiting for the show to begin. His mother reported magnificent animal spectacles—browsing deer, hawks swooping up field mice, fox skulking through the tall dry

grass. He had been here four days and seen nothing.

"It's in the way you sit and watch," his mother explained. "You have to sort of disappear."

Nick imagined in the meadow an unseen world burgeoning with life, as on one of those posters of a biological community where all God's creatures crowd peacefully together for the artist's convenience. Such a world would never be revealed to him, he knew, because he was not prepared to disappear into it. He was equipped to observe only half-attentively, so that the life of the pond and meadow showed itself cautiously, in degrees, through muted calls, tufts of fur caught on fences, and abandoned nests.

Nick closed his eyes and lay back on the hot planks of the dock. Back up in the house now his mother would be pressing Anne with questions. *What's wrong between you and Nick? You two have hardly spoken a word to one another.* The two women were friends and had been since Nick first brought Anne to visit. "She's a good one," his mother had whispered to him when, five minutes after arriving, Anne was wrestling her way into the brush in search of blackberries. With each visit his mother and Anne spent more and more time together, walking the woods and fields or sitting by the pond. Sometimes Nick would start out with them, but then he'd become restless and distracted and wander back to the house.

He knew Anne would be unable to answer his mother's questions. That would confuse his mother, a woman to whom answers and explanations came easily, and she would be hurt by Anne's seeming refusal to confide in her. But there really was nothing Anne could tell her. How could she describe the hazy distance between them? There had been no betrayal or angry revelation, no impasse about which his mother might offer counsel. *Well, what did Nick do then?* his mother would ask.

What did Nick do? Nick tilted his head back and squinted into the cloudless sky. In the distance a flock of crows chased a lone owl. He watched until the birds turned and disappeared behind a line of trees. It would seem that way to his mother, that he must have done something. Over the years he had brought several women to visit and all of them eventually vanished, for reasons he could never adequately explain. "You know, Nick," his mother once quietly admitted, "it's getting so I'm afraid to become attached to these girls, they come and go so quickly." It was her way of gently telling him: *I can become attached, Nick, why can't you?*

Something moved beneath the dock and he turned and peered between the planks. A snake lay on a crossbeam blankly staring up at him; a half-swallowed frog kicked in its mouth. Nick pulled away. So this was nature. Now he wanted to return to the house, but he was not ready to face the situation there. Maybe they would be out walking.

He scanned the hills then hurried out of his bathing suit and into his long pants. The climb up to the house always tired him regardless of the shape he thought he was in. Anne moved easily through this terrain. Back home he usually left her behind when they jogged; but she was comfortable and strong here, and it was he who lagged.

NICK STOOD TO THE SIDE of the kitchen window listening. Hot as the afternoon was, that's where they would be, sitting with their mugs of tea. No voices, safe to go inside. He dropped into an armchair in the living room and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. The distinction between indoors and outdoors had become blurred for his mother. Her rooms were cluttered with bits of nature she gathered on her daily walks: feathers for bookmarks, a dried fungi collection on the windowsill, twigs with lifeless egg casings still attached—something in every corner. The cool dark, the chairs and old rugs redolent with the smoke from winter fires—to Nick it was like entering a cave. He never lived in this farmhouse; his mother had bought it while he was finishing college, so his visits were always tinged with a sense of unfamiliarity. He was not at ease here: her collections pressed in upon him.

His mother entered the room with the silence she instinctively used to approach living things. Startled, Nick looked up. "Where's Anne?" he asked.

"Still walking," she replied, emptying her pockets of the day's booty.

Nick didn't say anything else, and she came and stood behind him, both hands on his shoulders. Without looking he knew her nails would be dirty.

"Nick, I like Anne. Are you going to . . . will she be back?"

"So much for preliminaries," he said twisting his shoulders so her hands fell away.

"I'm sorry, Nick, but I do like her. And I worry."

"About?"

She moved across the room to the window and stared down at the pond. "Deer," she said. "Nick, come look. Three of them on the bank."

"They'll be gone before I get there," he said settling back in his chair.

His mother turned, her face tight with anger. "Why do you come? You don't like it here, you never have."

"Mom."

"I don't understand you. You're like your father. Nothing makes you happy, nothing satisfies you. Nothing and no one."

"Mom, stop it. That's not true. I'm sorry about Anne."

She looked away, her voice softening. "So you are going to

leave her?"

"Maybe she'll leave me. That happens too, you know. They're not all victims." He rose and started for the door.

"You don't sit still for anything, do you, Nick?" she called after him.

NICK CHOSE A PATH which led away from the house and his mother's recriminations. For her, watcher of the woods, stillness was requisite for connection. To be still was to be touched, by the woods and animals, by people. But Nick recognized a different outcome, that to be touched was to be the frog kicking in the snake's mouth.

His father, with that same dread of being swallowed up, hesitated on the periphery of his mother's full world. The abundant life which found its way to her seemed to smother the man. He was an unreachable figure, restless and alone. Free of his restraint, Nick's mother had moved from the suburbs to this farmhouse soon after his death, and immersed herself in a landscape she had never shared with him.

Nick would leave Anne. Had he not already? It would take only the ritual chant of parting words to make permanent the distance between them. "I need to move," he would declare, avoiding the eyes which would try to hold him in an uncomprehending stare. He had learned not to look into their eyes.

As he entered a clearing a pheasant rose frantically from the underbrush, hovered flapping and squeaking before him, and disappeared. Stepping back, Nick stumbled on a root and fell. He started to rise, then abruptly sat down again as if he had suddenly decided that there was something else in this clearing that might make itself known to him. What was out here, what was it his mother and Anne could see that he could not? He would sit, as his mother instructed, and wait for it. He checked his watch, then settled back against a tree. Like a border guard scanning an empty frontier, Nick moved his head back and forth, ready. Minutes passed; he looked at his watch again. Why wouldn't it come to him? He shut his eyes and tried to force himself into the state of effortless perception his mother had described, but it would not come.

"There's nothing for you here," Anne's sad voice came from behind him.

Nick opened his eyes but did not turn around. "You followed me."

"You don't know these woods. I thought you might get lost."

"You were watching me."

"I suppose," said Anne.

Nick turned now and saw her leaning against a tree. "I didn't see

anything." He gestured at the empty clearing.

"You never do," she said.

Nick studied her. "So, what have you and my mother decided about me?"

Anne smiled distantly. "I'd say the question is what have you decided about *me*?"

Nick felt the ritual words rise to his lips, and he turned his eyes from hers. But Anne did not wait to hear them. He looked up to find her gone, the sound of her escape thinning to silence.

Nick listened for a time, then called her name. He ran to the edge of the clearing and called again. "Anne, wait." But even as he said the words he knew they meant nothing; he did not care if she returned to him. Like his father, he could not be touched. His father. Nick could see his anxious gray face, and the restless body which always moved slightly away whenever Nick came near. As if he were reaching for the old man Nick stretched one arm out before him and placed his hand on the side of the tree. He felt nothing. Startled, he ran both hands up and down the trunk. They were numb. He touched his face, sniffed hard at the air, and kicked at the dry leaves beneath his feet, but nothing penetrated his senses. Nothing reached him.

"Anne!" Nick began to run, away from the deadening solitude of his father, following the path that Anne had taken. As he ran he could feel his body begin to return to him. He listened to himself breathe, brushed the undergrowth with his hands as he rushed by. The woods seemed very green now, the air clean and cool. But he did not stop. He would come back here with Anne, he would let her take him into the woods.

THE FRONT DOOR of the house was open, and Nick paused before it. None of the day's brightness found its way inside. Through the screen door he could just see the clutter of the living room; the stale air drifted out to him. He heard his mother coughing in some distant room. She wandered to the front of the house in search of something. She looked up and did not seem surprised to see him standing there.

"Is Anne here?"

His mother regarded him as if he were a stranger who had no business standing on her porch. She spoke through the screen. "No."

"She didn't come by here?"

"No."

Nick stared at her, then beyond her into the dark crowded rooms, and felt the vitality that had come to him in the woods begin to slip away from him. He must find Anne.

"Mom, we'll be back." He offered a smile as he turned to go.

There were many places she could be. He tried the barn first, where he knew she liked to sit watching the swallows dart among the old beams. She was not there. And she was not down by the small creek that cut through his mother's property, or by the stone wall along the dirt road where the blackberries grew. He walked through the meadows, stepping up on rocks to see if she were sitting in the tall grass. The day was still hot and Nick was tiring. Burrs stuck to his socks and his arms itched from pushing through the thick growth which surrounded him. Where was she?

Nick heard a splash as he approached the pond. He could not yet see the water. He did not call out, or run up the side of the bank so she could see that he had come for her. He waited. Nick listened as she kicked through the water, imagining how beautiful her movements were. But still he did not show himself.

He heard the awful cries of a flock of crows and looked up. The black birds still chased the owl. The owl was tiring, its flight was unsteady and hopeless. Soon the crows would reach it.

He closed his eyes and stood at the edge of the pond listening to Anne swim, and knew he would not go to her.

The Tree Surgeon's Gift

EDWARD C. LYNSKEY

What he liked best was freewheeling
high across the windless dome
of a treetop, his guyropes flailing
like the slashed strands
to a mad spider's webbing.

When the "uptown mugwumps" voted
to uproot the Hang Tree
from the public garden, he didn't
kick. His crew did the work:
setting to torch the high branches.

He placed its heartwood
in the soft jaws of the Le Blond lathe,
crafting a lamp post.
By bulb light he studied
the dark blood lines of the hangman.

The Man on the Train: a border story

DANIEL GABRIEL

A FAT CUSTOMS OFFICER stood sniffing over my passport as the carriage rattled on in its descent. Then we were in Yugoslavia: the train leveled out and ran hard and fast into the narrow gorge of a river valley. His duties ended, the customs man inched his bulk through the crowded aisle back towards the bottle of plum brandy being passed in the rear of the car. The train went into a tunnel.

In the darkness echoes rattled the length of the carriage. Out we came. A thin, weedy fellow with an enormous grin slicing through his face stood in the aisle, bracing himself against my seat. He looked surprised to see another westerner.

"Hel-lo!" he said, accenting the second syllable. "Ain't this train great? Just cutting along like nobody's business. Whooo!" The smile expanded across his face till I thought his cheeks would split.

"Sit down," I said. "I could do with some company." It had been weeks since I'd spoken English, beyond the occasional grunted phrase with one of my local contacts. "Where you coming from?" I asked.

He bounced into the seat beside me, wispy hair trickling down around his ears, his eyes small and bright behind his glasses. "You American?" he said.

"Born and bred. And you?"

"Oregon. Near Portland. Say, we *are* in Yugoslavia now, right?"

I nodded.

For just a moment, that smile disappeared and he was serious. "We're out of Bulgaria for sure?"

"For sure. What's the matter, you dislike it all that much?"

"Oh man, if I could tell you" He broke off and nudged me. "That official. That guy in the uniform back there. Who's he?"

"He's from the Bulgarian side. He's nothing here. Just along for the ride."

"You're sure?" He licked at his lips.

I was beginning to wonder. "What're you, a refugee?" I asked.

He broke into a whistling laugh, then stopped quickly and looked over his shoulder. The fat man from customs was pulling hard on the plum brandy. My companion relaxed; and there was that grin again, stretched all the way to the end of his jaw.

"Refugee?" He chuckled over it. "Really, that's not so far off. Hey, listen—you going on to the Austrian border?"

"Beyond," I said.

"Great." He cut the word short and shoved his pack beneath his seat. "I got to tell somebody, might as well be you. My name's William," he said. "William McGee."

"Ryder."

We shook hands.

As he settled himself, William tossed out a question. "Say, what is it you do anyway?"

In my mind I saw the false bottom of my suitcase—and the Bibles that were no longer there. I thought of the people I'd left behind on this swing through Eastern Europe: pastors whose health had been permanently broken by torture; old women in head scarves and shawls who prayed through tears for the release of their grandchildren from state-run institutions. I ran my fingers across the outside of my coat pocket. I thought of the list it held, of the people who had "just disappeared."

I coughed mildly and said, "Literature distribution."

William gave a short laugh. "Literature, huh? Well, three months ago I was *studying* literature—English Medieval—at Portland State."

He fumbled around for a moment and produced a package of cigarettes. "What did I know." He grinned at himself. "But that was three months ago."

He took out a cigarette, lit it up, and leaned back in his seat. "Last week I was in Turkey," he said, exhaling upwards. "On a bus. Not a public bus—there was this English guy driving west from Kabul back to London, taking passengers and stuff. Mostly Aussies, a few Brits. I was the only American." He dragged again. "We trucked it straight through from Eastern Turkey all the way to Istanbul." He paused and shook his head. "Lot of hostile Turks out there."

"By the time we got to Istanbul we were fed up with the country. Just wanted to get out. The Bulgarian Embassy told us we didn't need visas as long as we were just in transit. Great, I thought. One less expense. So let's see, Monday . . . no, Tuesday morning it was, we set off for the border. You know the stretch?" I nodded. His angular face returned the motion and he went on. "We stopped in Edirne for sup-

per, so we didn't hit the frontier till after dark. The Turkish side was a breeze. On the Bulgarian side they did the usual searches—nothing very thorough, which was fortunate. Then the police asked to see passports. No problem till they got to mine.

"This hook-nosed guy with a scarred-up mouth looked it over and then he kind of spat in my face. 'Visa,' he said. 'Visa. Nix gut.'

"I looked right back at the guy and said, 'What? Embassy say *no* visa.'

"He whined at me and shook his finger. 'Visa, visa.'

"I pointed to all the other passengers. 'No visa, no visa.'

"He sneered at me. I remember his rotting teeth. He just sneered and said, 'American. Visa.' Then he took my passport and got off the bus. I had to follow."

"Didn't anybody on the bus try to help out?"

He laughed, but it sounded forced. "What could they do? The guy had my passport. Just before I got to the door the English driver took me aside and whispered, 'Look, they'll tell you to go back to Istanbul, sure as anything. Act as if you shall—be woeful and such. I'll run the bus on through customs and we'll pull off to the side of the road, just up a way. Right? We'll wait an hour. If you can sneak through—somehow—we'll be there. If not . . . ' He shrugged.

"I thought about being dumped out in Turkish no-man's land in the middle of the night. I wasn't sure I even had enough money to get back to Istanbul. I told him I'd be there.

" 'Right,' he said. 'But we can't wait forever, or the border guards'll get suspicious. And that I cannot have. One hour.'

"I got off the bus.

"The official hissed and howled while I hung my head and acted properly contrite. Finally he waved the bus through. After it was gone he gave me my passport and pointed me back towards Turkey."

WILLIAM STUBBED OUT his cigarette and stretched in his seat. He sneaked another glance around the train carriage. The bloated face of the official eyed the disappearing plum brandy with a visible hunger. The overhead lights brightened and dimmed erratically.

I thought about no-man's-land, that stretch between borders—sometimes inches, sometimes miles—where nothing but uniforms are safe, and then only if their color is the same as yours. "What did you do?" I asked. "That area's desolate. Edirne must be the nearest town and that's thirty miles away."

He lit another cigarette and blew smoke rings at the ceiling.

"I put on my pack and walked back into the darkness. I only went a couple hundred yards or so, then I dropped off the road into this

empty field and skirted across it till I figured I was out of sight. The border was close, but distance is deceptive after dark. Who knew how close? And who knew where the guards were or what they'd do if they spotted a shadowy figure sneaking through the night? They all carried machine guns and I figured they wouldn't think twice about a little extra target practice. I mean, you can imagine what I was thinking."

I could.

William went on. I thought I noticed a tremble in his voice, but perhaps it was only the movement of the train. "Oh, was I cautious. Way off to the right was a bit of light that marked the border post and I watched that with every step I took. I went slow and careful, but even so it was hard going. The ground was rocky, uneven. My biggest fear (besides machine guns) was that I'd fall into a pit or something. Heaven knows when you'd ever be found.

"Then I spotted another light, not too far beyond the border. It was the bus, and that gave me new hope.

"When I got a little closer I figured I'd better keep low, so I started to crawl. That damn pack kept slipping off my back. I crawled . . . and I crawled . . . and every now and then I stopped to listen.

"Then I hit the border. It was barbed wire—thick, triple strands, almost a solid wall of barbed wire, ten feet high. I tried climbing, but it was too wobbly and I could see myself slipping and being impaled there like meat on a hook." William's hands clawed the air.

"Couldn't you crawl through it?" I asked.

"Uh-uh," he said. "No hope. It was a bramble bush of metal. No way.

"So I had to go under it. Now that may sound easy, but it wasn't. The wire ran flat along the ground, stretched taut with hardly any give at all. I had to work my way along the wall of wire looking for something that would give way just enough to let me through. And all the while I could see those two lights: the border post and the bus. And I knew my time was running out."

I glanced back to where the plum brandy was still passing from hand to hand. The fat Bulgarian official was staring—not at the bottle—but at the back of William's neck. I looked again and his eyes flicked momentarily from William to me and then back.

Then our train went under another tunnel and I put him out of my mind. Our passage echoed down the enclosing walls. The lights went out altogether.

"Guess they want us to sleep," said William.

"Don't you *dare*," I exclaimed. I lit a match and held it towards him. "Get your cigarette lit and get on with it."

He did.

"I didn't dare go closer to the border post," he said, "so I worked

my way along the wire in the opposite direction, praying there wasn't a roving guard out there—or a land mine—or who knew what." The tip of his cigarette reddened and faded in several quick successions.

"I hit a post," he said. "A big thick wooden post with wire wrapped around it from top to bottom. And just near the base the ground sloped away a little to where I thought I had a chance. Just to be safe I shoved my pack under first. It was a tight fit, but no alarms went off and there it lay on the other side, waiting for me to come on through.

"So I lay down flat on my back and inched my face under the wire. Then my neck . . . my chest . . . and there I stuck. Stuck! The wire was caught on my jacket. I couldn't get the jacket off. I couldn't go back. I couldn't go forward. I was just stuck. I took a deep breath and the wire bit into my chest. Stuck! For just a moment I panicked. Oh, I tell you. My heart was beating so fast I thought it was playing 'Wipeout' on my kidneys." William snickered ruefully to himself. "Then I faced up to it. By exhaling as far as it could, my chest shrank down enough so it didn't hurt and I wormed forward as hard as I could. You could feel the wire shredding the coat. But I was moving, then I was under . . . I'd made it!

"When I rolled to my feet and grabbed my pack I was elated—absolutely elated—but I still had to be cautious. I started trotting towards the bus—on tiptoe, if you can imagine that. I wanted to cheer I was so happy . . . 100 yards to go . . . 50 . . . 30 . . . the bus started to move."

"What?" I interjected. "I thought they were supposed to be waiting for you."

"Well, the hour *was* up," William said. "That was the agreement. Not that that made me feel any better about it. What could I do? I started to run. The bus began to pick up speed and I was so desperate I had to risk yelling. 'Wait!' I shouted. 'Wait! Wait!'"

"The bus stopped. I was almost there when voices shouted from the border post and I could hear boots pounding the pavement towards us. I put my hand on the door of the bus.

"The door opened and then FLASH—there were lights, searchbeams. We were in the spotlight just like that. Somebody fired shots into the air and I froze. The people in the bus were scrambling, yelling."

I BROKE IN on William. "Why were the people in the bus so worried?"

"Contraband," he said. "The Englishman was bringing back a

five kilo load of hash. He had it wrapped in tin foil, sort of like a loaf of bread, and when the searchlights hit the bus, he knew what would happen. So the instant those lights flashed, he dug out that foil package and chucked it out the window.

"Then everybody shut up.

"I kind of shut my eyes against the light and put up my hands. The hook-nosed guy stepped out from behind the beams and slapped me across the face. In the darkness, the soldiers laughed. Then he gave an order, and three of them stepped onto the bus. All the passengers came out and stood in the road while the soldiers started stripping the interior, throwing out baggage and bottles, ripping at the seats.

"The hook-nosed man led the English driver and me back to his office. At first, he threatened to jail us both and impound the bus, but the Englishman gritted his teeth and wrangled back at him. I stayed quiet.

"Pretty soon you could see that what the Bulgarian wanted was a payoff. The Englishman breathed a little easier. I didn't, 'cause I had nothing to pay with.

"Bargaining went on for quite awhile. Finally one of the soldiers came in and spoke to the Bulgarian, who looked disappointed. They'd apparently found nothing. He dismissed the soldier.

"He sat and looked across at us for a minute, working his lips over his ugly mouth. Then he spoke to the Englishman. 'Damages,' he said. 'Forms. Much trouble here.' He waved a handful of papers at him and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

"The Englishman spoke up. 'Bus go,' he said, gesturing with his hand.

"Hook-nose nodded.

"The Englishman looked at me. I must have looked pretty miserable 'cause he said to the official, 'He go?'

"The official shook his head. 'Visa,' he said.

" 'No, no. He go back to Turkey. Get visa.'

"The official rubbed his fingers together again.

"The Englishman took out his wallet and threw down some pounds. 'For bus,' he said. He stopped and growled across at me. 'You bloody fool. I ought to let you waste away here.' Then he threw down some dollars and said, 'For him. Go Turkey.'

The official's hand passed over the table and the money disappeared. The Englishman went out. Pretty soon I could hear the bus start up and the noise of the engine got fainter and fainter. It was gone.

"The official stood up and bared his rotting teeth. He leaned close till I could smell the staleness of his breath. He pointed a finger at the side of his head and said one word. 'Think.'

“ ‘But he paid you,’ I said.

“He gestured again. ‘Think.’

“Then he went out of the room and locked the door.”

“No honor among thieves is there?” I put in. William’s twitchiness began to appear ever more reasonable. The office of a certain inspector in Bucharest came to mind. I tried not to think of the list in my pocket.

William went on. “Whooh. You can bet I thought. Thought and stewed and bit my nails. Anything could happen and all of it bad. I mean I liked to piss my pants.

“Time passed. More. I figured for sure Hook-nose had decided just to pocket the money and keep me anyway. I was mad and scared and so wrought up my intestines felt like they’d been used in a Boy Scout knot-tying contest.

“Things looked bad. Finally, Hook-nose came back in, lifted me out of my seat and dragged me through the door. He pointed me again towards Turkey and kicked me hard in the seat of my pants.

“I took off. Nobody called after me.”

I STARED INTO THE DARKNESS in William’s direction while he sucked long and deep on the cigarette. The ember glowed, then faded. We sat in silence.

He sighed. “That’s one night I’ll never forget. And God help me if I ever have to do it again. There was no moon, hardly any stars. Just enough light to make the shadows move when you looked at them fast. You know that stretch of Turkey. Nothing out there. No traffic, nobody. Just sounds and shadows and sudden gusts of wind on your neck. I just walked.

“By morning I was exhausted—and I hadn’t even made Edirne yet. But then I had a stroke of luck. A Turkish truck came steaming by and I danced and waved till my arms hurt. It stopped. The driver leaned out his window and yelled down at me. Just one word, but a lovely one. ‘Istanbul?’ he said.

“ ‘Istanbul!’ I yelled back.

“He was hauling manufactured goods back from Germany. Spoke a little German, in fact, so we got on all right. I told him a bit of my story and he sympathized. In fact, he insisted I stay with him at his mother’s house in Istanbul.

“I insisted on making one stop en route to his house: the Bulgarian Embassy. Then I slept till the following day. Friday morning I had my visa and Ahmed (my new friend) had put me on a train to Edirne at his expense.

"But I still had that border to face. And virtually no money. I didn't know if they'd even let me cross—visa or no.

"I arrived mid-afternoon, so luckily the guards were different. Day shift this time, I guess. No Hook-nose and seemingly no one else that remembered me. My papers were in order, so in went the proper stamp and off I went.

"I walked a little way up the road and sat down on my pack to wait. I sure wasn't going to walk the length of Bulgaria, so I just had to hope for a lift from another trucker or somebody like that. But there was no traffic that day. I sat for an hour; for two. Nothing. It started to get cold and I was feeling worse and worse.

"I was sitting there staring when I noticed something glinting down in the gully off the side of the road. The angle of light was just right to pick it up.

"It took a moment, but then my brain clicked. I remembered the Englishman's package. I'd figured he'd picked it up before the bus left the border, but there must not have been a chance. I did a dance step alongside my pack. Five kilos of primo Afghani hash! My fortune was made. I took a step towards the gully and then stopped.

"I heard a motor in the distance. A truck—a big, international-type truck—was rolling out of customs. It might just be the last chance of the day. I couldn't decide: I teetered on the edge of the gully. The glint of light on the foil, the engine's rumble approaching . . . The truck stopped. Indecision. Panic."

William's hand gripped mine in the darkness. "I was right on the edge," he said.

I could only attempt a reassuring squeeze. "What a choice. What did you do?"

"Well," he said. "I had to have a ride. The night shift (and Hook-nose) might be coming on duty at any minute. Yet to leave the package, to waste such an incredible opportunity! I wavered. I cursed. I ran for the truck.

"I opened the passenger door and smiled in. 'Thank you, *merci, danke schoen,*' I said.

"The driver wagged his head.

"One minute," I said, looking as forlorn as possible. I held up one finger and mimed the need to have a leak. The driver laughed and waved me off. I slid down into the gully and there it was. A tightly wrapped tin foil package. Five kilos! I laughed aloud. Five kilos! I tucked it under my coat and scrambled up the bank.

"The truck was there, idling. I got in and we started off in a great shifting and clattering of gears. I looked back out my rear view mirror. The border guards were being changed; the night shift had arrived."

OUR TRAIN WENT OVER a bump and the lights clicked back on. I looked across at William McGee. His forehead was shiny with sweat. He took a last drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out. His hand shook.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he said. His head swivelled and his glasses stared at me. The light reflected so that his eyes were invisible. "You think I'm making it up."

"No"

"Or at least exaggerating." He exhaled in a wheezing rush. "I just wish I was." He dug under his seat and produced a faded canvas pack. His right hand disappeared inside. He fumbled, grunted, and then his hand reappeared. It held a largish foil package. "Sniff," he said, holding it up to my nose.

The smell was strong and sweet, and a little intoxicating even through the foil. There was no doubt as to the contents.

William put the package away and stuffed his gear back under the seat. His head nodded slightly, musingly. I could find nothing to say. He felt in his pocket for another cigarette. "Damn, I'm out of smokes." He stood up. "I'll just try the dining car. Should get some there."

I turned and watched him go. He squeezed past the circle of brandy drinkers and through the door of the carriage. After a moment, the fat Bulgarian official wiped his mouth and stood up. He eased his bulk through the door behind him.

The lights went out again. The train rattled on. I fell asleep.

WHEN I WOKE, pale slivers of morning sun slid through the window blinds. Futilely, I massaged my aching neck. Two officials, a Yugoslav and an Austrian, came down the aisle and stopped at my seat. The Austrian border, I thought dimly.

"Passport," said the Yugoslav.

I fumbled it out.

They both eyed it briefly and handed it back. "Baggage." The Austrian spoke with Germanic precision. I indicated my bag. They prodded desultorily, grunting in satisfaction.

"Yours?" The Austrian pointed at a dusty pack stuffed under the seat on my right. I remembered William McGee. Where in the world?

"No, no. Friend." I pointed back towards the dining car, praying my face would hide the growing fear and confusion I felt.

The Yugoslav reached under the seat and hauled out William's pack. I began to sweat. The officials patted briefly around the outside and then the Austrian undid the top. He thrust in his hand.

I looked out the window: I couldn't bear to watch. Would I be held responsible? What were the penalties? I fought terror.

"Danke schoen."

I looked around in time to see the retreating backs of both officials. William's pack lay resting on the seat beside me. I was stunned—they'd found nothing. Unable to resist, I dug down to where I'd seen William pull out the package. Nothing. I punched and prodded, shook and searched the pack inside and out. Nothing. The package was gone. So was William, I now realized as the last vestiges of sleep finally seeped away.

I sat up straight, blinking sticky eyes. The coach was nearly empty. The drinkers near the door were gone, and in their stead a small man in conductor's uniform busied himself with some papers.

I stood up a bit unsteadily and made my way back to the door. The conductor spoke up as I passed. "Toilet is other way," he said.

"Dining car," I said. "I'm just going to the dining car."

"Sorry," he said. "No dining car on this train."

No dining car. No William. No foil package. No fat Bulgarian official. I stood there in the aisle, rubbing my neck. My hand went to the list in my pocket. An empty bottle of plum brandy rolled noisily about beneath the seats. It was a Bulgarian brand.

Patterns

SUSAN IRENE REA

You are gone.
Like a ragged quilt in our yard,
stiff patches of ground
rise out of snow
the sun's burned through.
The birds have remained, so I feed them.

In the cedar a whitethroat flutters;
hunger has driven it
close to me. You won't hear
the unexpected song that forms
its tangible pattern,
melting the air.
It doesn't stop the winter.

Now, since there's nowhere to go,
I lean against the cedar.
You have taken the house away
with you, leaving behind
a silence of many shapes and colors.

Contributors

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